

Thorson Block
200 Main Street
Westby
Vernon County
Wisconsin

HABS No. WI-316

HABS
WIS,
62-WEST,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 24287
Denver, Colorado 80225

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
THORSON BLOCK

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: 200 Main Street, Vernon County
Westby, Wisconsin

Date of Construction: 1905

Present Owner: Eric Erlandson

Present Use: Vacant. Projected date of removal is July 1990.

Significance: The Thorson Block was constructed in 1905 by the local firm of Theo. Thoreson. Significant design elements include the use of rusticated concrete block, symmetrical facade, the cross muntined second story window transoms and the molded horizontal bandings and cornice.

Historian: Compiled by David Pawlisch using excerpts from Joyce McKay and Norene Roberts, 1989, Section 106. Assessments of Walt's Food Mart, Westby Theater, and Thorson Block.

II. HISTORY

A. CITY OF WESTBY

The City of Westby was originally settled in 1869 by Norwegian settlers. Westby experienced a dramatic growth period which lasted from 1901-1916. Westby's population increased from 500 to 1,000 persons during this period.

Westby's boom period was a result of its role as a distribution node for agricultural products, namely tobacco. Tobacco warehouses located in Westby employed 200 persons in the late 1890's. Westby benefited from the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul railroad which transported goods to the major markets of St. Paul and Chicago during the late 1890's and early 1900's. The addition of the LaCrosse-Southeastern railroad in 1904 firmly established Westby as a distribution center for agricultural products.

B. THORSON BLOCK

The Thorson Block was erected in 1905 at 200 Main Street (formerly 315 Main St.) in downtown Westby. Tilpher J. Thorson was the first owner of the building and a local prosperous businessman. By 1913, he operated a general real estate practice and was also assistant cashier of the Westby State Bank.

In 1913 the first floor of the Thorson Block was used by the Westby State Bank while the second floor housed T.J. Thorson's real estate practice.

Records indicate that T.J. Thorson lost title to the building to the Westby State Bank in 1937. Prior to 1937 records show that the building was used as a photography studio and restaurant. In 1938 the building housed a bakery. After 1938 the building is known to have been occupied by Roehl's Clothing Shop and Anderson's sundry.

The Thorson Block has played a varied role in the development of Westby's commercial district. Several different businesses have been housed in the Thorson Block. These businesses for the most part were service oriented, the most prominent being the Westby State Bank.

III. ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

A. LOCATION AND EXTERIOR DESCRIPTION

The Thorson Block is two stories tall with rusticated concrete block walls and full basement. It was designed in Classical Revival style and put up in 1905. The building measures 28 feet wide by 69 feet deep. It sits on the west side of Main Street, at 200 Main Street (formerly 315 Main St.) almost directly across from where First Street T's into Main. There is a vacant lot to the north and the Thorson Block shares a party wall with the 1937 Westby Theater to the south. The building is sited flush with the sidewalk.

The building design is a restrained Classicism. The building is symmetrical in original design. It is composed of a single bay with three second story windows slightly recessed between end piers. All original design elements above the first story are intact. The second story windows are tied together with a continuous band of stone at the sills. The original second story windows are intact; double

hung one-over-ones in wood frames with Classically-inspired cross muntin window transoms above. The window lintels are brick and jack-arched. Above the windows is a molded horizontal band delineating the frieze, centered on which in stone is "Thorson" in large block letters. The projecting wooden cornice is molded below a concrete block parapet with molded banding at the coping. Window lintels, horizontal banding and cornice are painted white.

The north facade of the building is nearly intact with rusticated concrete block and four one-over-one second story wood windows with glass transoms on the three large windows. A first story window toward the rear of the building has been blocked up and has a window air conditioner installed. The foundation is rubble sandstone and cement, partly covered with wall board.

B. INTERIOR DESCRIPTION

The interior first floor contains one large room across the front of the store with a smaller room across the rear. On the first floor, the original walls, ceiling, and floors are covered with applied materials: wall board, dropped ceiling, and carpeting. The original ceiling, however, is pressed tin (still extant) and the original walls are rough plaster.

The second floor contains two finished rooms toward the front and an unfinished one at the rear. The second floor has plastered walls and ceilings with wood floors. On the second floor millwork and doors are oak. The top of the window frames are beaded and probably original.

At the base of the stairs is a square oak newel post and the staircase has square balusters. The second floor has been vacant since 1954.

C. ALTERATIONS AND MODIFICATIONS

Historic photographs indicate that the storefront originally had a central entrance with two angled flanking shop windows. The storefront today has a double angled shed roofed awning which extends from the top of the first story down to cover the area of the original display window transoms and the upper half of the original display windows. New lower display windows are aluminum and glass flanked by a door leading to the second floor and a door leading into the Country Collectibles shop on the first floor.

The rear has new flashing at the roof, a one story gabled frame addition with vertical siding, and a newer brick chimney stack.

Overall, the building integrity is good, save for the usual storefront alterations, the interior remodeling on the first floor in the store, and the rear frame addition. Although the building has some structural cracking and water damage to the second story ceiling, the condition of the building is very good.

IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The City of Westby has granted a Wisconsin Development Fund loan to Market Square Foods to expand their business. Market Square Foods has acquired the Thorson Block property with plans to demolish the building to

create room for expansion. Market Square Foods desires to construct a new convenience store with gas pumping equipment.

The following persons participated in preparing the documentation on the Thorson Block: Dr. Joyce McKay, Cultural Resources Consultant; Dr. Norene Roberts, Historical Research, Inc.; Kurt Muchow and David Pawlisch, Vierbicher Associates, Inc.; and City of Westby officials. These records were prepared from October 1989 to August 1990.

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WEST STATE

1st

2nd

MARKET

MAIN

WESTBY
WISCONSIN

THORSON
BLOCK

MILES

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